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Introduction

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The site of Siraf, modern Taheri, lies on the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf, 220 Km. south-east of Bushehr and approximately 380 Km. west-north-west of Bandar Abbas. The existence of a ruined site at Taheri was reported by James Morier in 1812 and the site was visited subsequently by Captain Brucks, I.N the first surveyor of the Persian Gulf, who thought that it was Portuguese. It was later visited by three other officers of the Indian Navy: Captain G. B. Kempt Horne, who examined the site in 1835 and was the first person to identify the ruins with Siraf, Commodore Ethersey and Captain Arthur Stiffe. Kempt Horne and Stiffe were the first writers to publish eye-witness accounts of the site and Kempt Horne removed a stone grave cover which he presented to the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. In the 1860 Taheri was visited by a ship involved in laying one of the submarine cables between Bushehr and Jask, 225 Km. south-east of Bandar Abbas. On this occasion a second grave cover was removed and presented to the British Museum. The site has been visited on several occasions in the twentieth century: notably by members of the French expedition to Sabzabad, a prehistoric site near Bushehr, by Sir Arnold



Wilson in 1911, Sir Aurel Stein in 1933, Karl Lindberg in 1940 and Prof. L. Vanden Berghe in 1960-61. All these visitors produced accounts of Taheri and Steins description contains the fullest discussion of the site hitherto published. In 1962 Dr. Alastair Lamb visited Taheri and reported on its archaeological potential.

The earliest reference to Siraf occurs in the writings of Ibn al-Faqih (active c.850 A.D.), who noted that Sirafi ships traded with India. About the same time Sulaiman the Merchant recorded that Middle Eastern goods bound for China were sent first from Basra to Siraf, whence they were dispatched by way of Muscat and Quilon, an important entrepot on the Malabar Coast. Fifty years later Abu Zaid (877-915/6) himself a merchant of Siraf, noted that Sirafi Merchants visited Jidda in the Red Sea and the Zanzibar coast. Abu Zaid also stated that, although Chinese coins were still in circulation at Siraf, the volume of trade between the Persian Gulf and China had decreased after the massacre of foreign merchants in Canton in 878. When Masudi (d.956) visited Madagascar between 916 and 926 he found ships from Siraf and Oman and he also noted the presence of Sirafi vessels at the head of the Persian Gulf in the ports of al-Ubulla and Abbadan.

The next geographer to mention Siraf, Istakhri (writing shortly before 950), provides the fullest surviving account of the city. In the district of Ardashir (south-west Fars), he wrote, Siraf was second in importance only to Shiraz and was almost as large as the latter. Despite its position in the hottest part of the coast and the scarcity of drinking water, fruit and vegetables, all of which were fetched from the plain of Jamm, Siraf was a prosperous city with imposing buildings. The multi-story houses were built with wood imported from East Africa and a merchant might spend as much as 30000 dinars on building a house. Ibn Hauqal, another tenth-century writer who derived much of his account from Istakhri, added that the city possessed three places of worship. According to Istakhri, the merchandise which passed through Siraf included aloes, ambergris, camphor, gemstones, bamboo, ivory, ebony, paper, sandalwood and other perfumes, drugs and spices. The city was an important market for pearls and among its own products were linen napkins and veils. Writing of the period 908-932, the twelfth century writer Ibn al-Balkhi recorded that the value of goods handled at Siraf amounted to no less than 2,530,000 dinars per annum.

However, by the time Muqaddasi wrote a description of Siraf in the late tenth century a decline had begun. The city was still an important entrepot with remarkable houses, but a sever



earthquake which lasted for seven days had damaged the city in 977 and many of the merchants had moved elsewhere. After the fall of the Buyid Dynasty (c. 1055) and the consequent disruption of trade routes in Fars, much of the foreign traffic was diverted from Siraf to Qais, an offshore island some 110 km. farther north. Thus, when Ibn al-Balkhi wrote the *Fars Nama* in the twelfth century, Siraf had greatly declined. When Yaqut (writing in 1218) visited the site the city was in ruins and supported only a few impoverished inhabitants. The only large building still intact was a mosque with wooden columns. The place-name Siraf had become corrupted to Shilau, a name still attached to part of the site.

We may summarize the documentary evidence for the history of siraf as follows. By the time Siraf was mentioned first (c. 850), it was already a flourishing port with merchants dealing with India and south-east Asia. During the next hundred years the city continued to prosper and Sirafi merchants traded with the Red Sea, East Africa and Madagascar in the West and with India, the Malay Peninsula and china in the east. In the early tenth century, more than 2.5 million dinars worth of woods passed through Siraf annually. In 977 the city was damaged by an earthquake and thereafter declined. After the fall of the Buyids (c. 1055) most of the trade was diverted to Qais and by 1218 Siraf was in ruins.

The site of Siraf Extends along the edge of a shallow bay, the ends of which are low sandy spits. The bay, which faces south, is 4 km. across. Immediately inland is a rugged sandstone ridge. In this part of Fars, the hinterland consists of a series of long mountainous ridges roughly parallel to the coast. These ridges, which are precipitous and reach heights of more than 1500 m. within 20 km. of the sea, are broken only occasionally by passes, making communication between the coast and the interior extremely difficult. At Siraf itself the first low ridge begins less than 500 m. from the beach, leaving only a narrow habitable strip. The bay is divided into two unequal parts by a spur which runs from the first ridge to the sea. To the east lies the village of Taheri and on the spur itself is the Shaik's fortified mansion. To the west of the spur is the site of Siraf, which extends along the shore for more than 2 km. The coastal strip widens towards the west end of the bay until, on the west side of a dry wadi known as Kunarak, the plain of Bagh-i-Shaikh is about 1 km. across.

In the western part of the bay the first ridge is broken at two points:

By the winding valley of Kunarak, through which the modern road approaches Taheri, and 1500 m. farther east by a narrow gorge known as Tang-i-Lir. Kunarak evidently served, as it does



today, as the starting point of the route to the plain of Jamm. Between Kunarak and the Sheikh's fort two additional spurs project from the south side of the first ridge. The larger spur, which is in fact almost parallel to the ridge, extends westwards from Tang-i-Lir for about 1 km. It is separated from the ridge by a valley which retains the thirteenth-century name Shilau. The second, smaller spur lies between the west side of Shilau valley and a gully which enters the bed of Kunarak wadi. The first spur is surmounted by the small ruined structure which the villagers of Taheri miss-identify as a madrasa, and the second by the more extensive ruins of a mosque.

The site of Siraf thus occupies a triangle bounded by the sea, the first ridge and Kunarak wadi, with outlying ruins to the west in the plain of Bagh-i-Shaikh. The whole of this triangle is covered with building debris. N, standing ruin survives and much of the area is used for cultivation by the villagers of Taheri. The surface of the site consists of scattered footings and heaps of rubble, most of which has been removed from garden plots and piled round the edges. Seen from the air, this activity gives the erroneous impression that the plan of whole quarters of Siraf is plainly visible; the "plan", however, is that of the modern fields. Nevertheless, certain features of the city are, or until recently were, immediately obvious. For example, when Stein visited

Siraf he noted the remains of a massive “sea wall” extending along the beach for more than 400 m. on either side of the footings which he correctly identified as a mosque. Nothing of this wall, which was reinforced on the seaward face with triangular and semi-circular buttresses, survives today, although two short sections (which Stien did not record) exist near Site D. In fact, the most Impressive standing remains belong to the mosque, labeled masjid, overlooking Kunarak valley. The mosque belongs to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, but apparently stands on the site of an earlier structure because the vicinity is littered with fragments of tenth-, eleventh- and early twelfth-century grave covers. However, the most spectacular features of Siraf are the cemeteries in Shilou valley. These cover the northern slopes of the valley and consist of numerous rock-cut graves, most of which are now empty. The largest cemetery occupies an abandoned quarry which probably supplied stone for many of the earlier building of Siraf. Finally, outside the medieval city, on the east spit of Taheri Bay, are mounds of debris from a group of pottery kilns with an output similar to the kilns at Site D.